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—THE TRIBUNE CREDO

THE POWERS STORY

Francis Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot whose high altitude reconnaissance plane came down in Russia May 1, 1960, has finally told his story publicly. His account before the Senate armed services committee cleared up some unanswered questions, but leaves others unsolved.

Powers had already been given a pass by the central intelligence agency and its director, John McCone, as a man who had lived up to his $30,000 a year contract with CIA and had done all that could reasonably be expected of him to protect the interests of his country, both while he was in flight and after his capture by the Russians.

His story was virtually a first person repetition of what the CIA had released in its report two hours before his appearance. As his account had already been checked against a lie detector at his own request while he was being interrogated by the CIA, it must be accepted that what he related represents the extent of his knowledge.

What brought down his plane? Apparently we shall never have a definitive answer. At 68,000 feet, he heard a sharp report behind him and the craft was suffused with an orange light. He felt that the accompanying shock was external to the plane. Very shortly the plane was in a spin, nose upward, and losing altitude rapidly. Powers thinks the tail section and wings tore loose.

The Russians were at pains to assert that they had brought down the U-2 with a ground-to-air missile, effective at a height of almost 13 miles. Certainly they possessed no such weapon during four previous years in which an estimated 150 U-2 missions were flown over the Soviet Union. Powers told of having seen the jet streams of two soviet fighters below him, but this incident occurred well before his sudden descent and apparently was unrelated to it.

Why didn't Powers kill himself to avoid capture? The CIA says he was under no instruction to do so. He had been told to surrender without resistance and cooperate with his captors if he could not escape. He was regarded by CIA as a pilot-technician, not a spy.

Why didn't he use the destructive apparatus built into the plane? This was limited to a 2½ pound explosive charge and was not designed to destroy the craft, the precision camera, and other apparatus, but merely to render them inoperable.

To set off the charge, Powers had to throw four switches. The explosion would come in 70 seconds. He could have detonated the charge had he acted at once, but he tried first to figure how to get out of the plane. Had he pressed the button of his ejector seat, he feared that, in the upright position of the plane, his legs would have been cut off as he was catapulted over the metal frame of the windshield.

Gravity had forced him forward and upward against the instrument panel. He clawed loose the plane canopy and was thrown from the plane by the rush of air, held only by his oxygen tube. By that time he could no longer reach the destruction switches. He tore the tube free and his parachute opened without any action on his part.

Powers says he was neither drugged nor tortured, but was subjected to 10 and 12 hours of questioning at a stretch.

Khrushchev used the incident as the pretext for scuttling the Paris summit conference with President Eisenhower, but his real reason appears to have been his knowledge that he would prove unable to extort any concessions at Berlin from the western allies.

The Powers story comes to an unsatisfactory conclusion, but it is probably all that we will ever know. The question will continue to perplex many of his countrymen whether his responsive attitude to soviet propaganda purposes at his Moscow trial exceeded what might have been expected of a more steadfast man. But his employers say they are satisfied, and that will be the official end of this curious affair.

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